

Teaching Writing: A Reflective Account

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Abstract

This article is a reflective account of my pedagogical engagement with a student from a Hindi-medium school background in an MA course on critical and academic writing. Three approaches to encourage critical engagement with writing have been emphasized in this article: socio-cultural reflection on anxieties around writing; dialogic engagement with the student to discuss the logic behind sentences instead of mere explanation of grammatical conventions; and bolstering student motivation through self-evaluation exercises.

"Is English something one just has or is it something that can be earned?" I was teaching a course on critical writing in a Master's programme on liberal studies¹, that was designed to introduce students from various disciplinary backgrounds to critical argumentation. The student who asked me this question went on to tell me about her anxieties with articulation in English. She had studied in a Hindi-medium school and had always struggled with coherent articulation in English; she relied on literal translation from Hindi. In a class filled with students mostly from elite English medium schools, here was a student asking me if it was possible to learn English through a formal course. Her question revealed a certain skepticism shared by many learners doing both professional as well as academic English courses, that such courses benefit the already privileged, not those with little to no cultural or linguistic exposure to English. In this essay, I will reflect on my experience of pedagogically engaging with this student (henceforth referred to as 'S') and the different approaches that I used over the course of ten months, to help facilitate her growth in writing. I will focus on three primary approaches: first, encouraging reflection on the socio-cultural basis of her relationship with English; second, working on how sentences can best capture the logic of thought; and third, critically motivating her through the duration of the course. While this experience is rooted in a postgraduate program where students already had a minimal fluency of English (at least oral, if not written), I hope that some of the insights can be useful for language and writing teachers across educational contexts.

Socio-Cultural Reflection

Since the course thematically engaged with debates in education, I encouraged the students to reflect on how their relationship with literacy had been influenced by larger socio-cultural forces. We recognized the power relations between students based on their socio-economic background, identity, access to resources, and standards imposed in academic institutions. This was to challenge the perception that difficulty with reading/writing was an individual problem, and instead emphasize that it was related with multiple social factors. One of the assignments to facilitate such a reflection was the literacy narrative: students were encouraged to write a short essay on a struggle they had experienced while learning in the program. The assignment had three steps: first, students were asked to write a short description on their emotional experience of the struggle; second, they were asked to read analytical essays on similar themes; and finally, they had to transition from the description to an evaluation of their struggle. S chose to write on her relationship with English, focusing on her anxieties around writing:

The equation between me and writing is complicated because I imagine writing as an act of empowerment but the current status of reality check [sic] says that it makes me feel vulnerable. The more I want to write, more I expose to the reality [sic], I am unable to write well (...) Inability to write well – what is cause [sic] of my inability. Is the problem is [sic] psychological, social or linguistic? Question, Question, Question but no single answer to give [sic] ... (Literacy Narrative Assignment)²

While S's articulation was not entirely clear owing to imprecise vocabulary and

multiple grammatical inaccuracies, she was able to convey the paradox of her experience with English. The assignment probed her to think about the complexity of the problem—the fact that it could be based on multiple psychological, social, and linguistic factors. She went on to think of how the problem had emerged by recognizing how she was “taught grammar but not taught how grammar will be used in [sic] real life situation”. She finally diagnosed the problem as being a function of the “product system [sic] of writing whose only focuses [sic] was getting grammar right ... and that expectation of accuracy and controlled rules of grammar has overpowered my daring [sic] of writing”.

The assignment, by her own admission, helped her to develop a vocabulary to label and de-mystify the problem: that owing to the emphasis on writing as a product, she had been unable to develop a contextually meaningful relationship with linguistic expression in English. One phrase that caught my attention was “daring of writing”. What she meant was that writing required an act of daring or courage to express oneself, to be able to creatively and morally express oneself. She also articulated the problem in terms of her bilingualism:

Still, grammar, article, comma, long list of punctuation marks [sic] overpowers my intensity [sic] to express. To rectify the situation - [sic] They told me, write small sentences, but [the] intensity of my emotions was unbearable for small sentences . . . I always felt, my intensity of emotions get [sic] lost in [sic] process of translation from Hindi to English. (Literacy Narrative Assignment)

S's articulation of tenses and her conflicted relationship with the English language helped me fine-tune my approach. To begin with, I realized that merely pointing out the correct grammatical convention might not

necessarily motivate her; instead, I began to focus on clarifying the logic behind her sentences. Second, I recognized that she had to rely less on direct translation, and engage more with the emotional idioms within the English language itself. I realized that it was important to motivate her and facilitate a self-evaluation practice, to overcome the feeling of being punitively judged by standards she did not entirely understand or agree with. As a critical counterpoint, I should note that the assignment in itself does not necessarily empower students to write better. However, as I have shown, it helps clarify how they experience a conflict in language acquisition and learning. This further helps the facilitator plan interventions specific to the student.

Focusing on the Logic behind the Sentences

In my initial feedback to S, I pointed out various grammatical errors, labelling them as problems of subject-verb agreement, tense, punctuation use, etc. Ironically, she told me that she had gone through many grammar books, but was still unable to rectify the problems with her writing. I therefore adopted a slightly different approach. While I continued to point out the convention to her, especially with regard to punctuation, I focused more on clarifying the logic behind the sentences³. For example, she had written the sentence: 'The more I want to write, more I expose to the reality, I am unable to write well'. Now while this sentence vaguely conveys the idea that her attempt to express is constrained by an awareness of either her own limitations or the conventions within which she has to write, the lack of explication of what “reality” means dilutes the clarity of the sentence. In our one-on-one conversation, I asked her what she meant by “reality”. I

explained that while it may be self-evident to her, another person might not understand. Similarly, I asked her who or what she was exposing to reality ("I expose to" does not logically convey that she is exposing herself). I also asked her why she had used the word "expose", since she seemed to be referring to a sense of becoming aware and being constrained by a certain "reality". I then asked her if she was unable to write well because of what she was feeling, since there was no causal relationship established between the final phrase and the previous two phrases of the sentence. I found it difficult to demonstrate the use of "the" in the second phrase through a question, and so I explained it as a convention. During the conversation, we deliberated upon alternate phrasings. For example, one alternative could be "The more I write, the more I feel constrained by conventions of writing, and thus/so I am unable to write well". While S did not necessarily feel satisfied with the alternate sentences, it was an attempt to show her how the clarity of a sentence depends on both capturing the idea using the most relevant vocabulary as well as ensuring that there is a logical relationship between different parts of the sentence. To reinforce the logic of the sentence, I changed the basic structure of the sentence to "The more I ..., the more I ..., and so I ...". I wanted to demonstrate to S how the same logical structure could be used in multiple contexts.

However, such an exercise needs to be supplemented with a longer process of cultural immersion and negotiation to critically acquaint oneself with context-specific usage. In her final paper on the importance of "passion" in teaching, S had to negotiate between her existing cultural idealization of the teacher as a "guru", worthy of reverence, and the academic study of the modern school teacher as a complex subject working within professional constraints. I thought it was essential to reflect on both through

dialogue. We scheduled several conversations in which we went back and forth to flesh out the ideas, not prioritizing one cultural frame over another, but instead trying to develop a comparative understanding of the different frames through which the identity of the 'teacher' is studied.

Motivation

The importance of dialogue brings me to the final point—the role of motivation in facilitating writing. S, in my initial assessment, seemed to be a fairly motivated, disciplined, and enthusiastic student. She finished her class readings, paid attention in class, and even participated in classroom discussions. However, I realized that her motivation to improve her English language communication wavered occasionally, as she wondered whether her efforts were entirely futile. When I was giving her oral feedback on her literacy narrative, she broke down, and told me about her acute sense of failure in attempting to learn the language. She also told me that it was her father's dream she was trying to fulfill, since he had constantly pushed her to prioritize the learning of English, but now it had become both her dream and her burden. While it is important to reassure the student at such moments, it is equally important to demonstrate to him/her how they have improved over time. In class, I used questionnaires for the entire class, asking if the piece was coherently and lucidly written, to facilitate peer reviews. In one-on-one conversations, I asked S to compare her present writing with what she had written in the past and to observe the changes in her writing. Through the course, her ability to self-evaluate significantly improved.

S's motivation to fluently express herself in English was simultaneously linked to

her aspiration towards social and psychological empowerment, as well as her professional motivation to teach. Through the literacy narrative and the final paper, I encouraged her to choose topics where she could critically explore her social and professional motivations, to think harder about the specific role that English needed to play in her life. To conclude, the attempt to help her improve her fluency in argumentative writing in English gradually grew into a larger examination of the role English plays in our individual and social lives.

Notes

1. This course runs at the Young India Fellowship, a postgraduate diploma program. I teach a course in the Critical Writing programme, titled "Education and Society", which runs for a duration of ten

months over two semesters. The course is thematically focused on debates on education in India, while simultaneously making students write and revise multiple drafts of assignments in genres such as summary, review, narrative essay and research paper, to develop academic and critical literacies. The experience recounted here is from 2017-2018.

2. I have quoted directly from her assignment, without edits. I feel it is important to recognize the idioms within which the student attempts to articulate, and not immediately denigrate it as incorrect.
3. For a detailed exposition of this approach, see Fish (2011), particularly chapters 1 and 3.
4. For a longer discussion on the role of motivation in facilitating writing, see Hidi and Boscolo's (2011) edited corpus.

References

Fish, Stanley. (2011). *How to write a sentence: And how to read one*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Hidi, Suzanne, & Boscolo, Pietro. (Eds.). (2007). *Writing and motivation*. Amsterdam: Elsevier.